

**EXPLORING THE THINKING OF ISLAMISTS:  
ISLAMIST VIEWS TOWARD  
GOVERNMENT, THE ECONOMY, AND PLURALISM**

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## **Introduction**

This paper outlines core Islamist beliefs in three key areas:

- **Government**: What should an Islamist polity look like? How should it be organized? How would those holding political offices be selected? Would there be separate branches of government, and what would be their prerogatives? What is the range of Islamist views on democracy?

- **The economy**: According to what principles should an Islamist economy be organized? How central are economic issues to Islamists? How do Islamists weigh the relative importance of, on the one hand, the call for social justice and for meeting basic needs through redistributive policies, and, on the other hand, respect for private property and the need to reward individual initiative? Can Islamists be expected to be well-disposed toward a neo-liberal economic agenda?

- **Pluralism**: What would be the place of non-Muslims and women in an Islamist polity? How would an Islamic polity treat those who do not subscribe to an Islamist agenda? How much freedom of expression and belief would there be in an “Islamic state”?

Throughout the paper, the term “Islamists” refer to those political activists in the contemporary Muslim world who invoke Islam as their primary inspiration, and as the source of legitimacy for their political ideas and program. They agree on a handful of fundamental principles and objectives, beyond which one actually can detect differences of opinion among them – some of which are minor, while others are far more substantive. For the moment, suffice it to say that Islamists share the following core beliefs:

- They claim as their primary objective the establishment of sociopolitical and economic systems consistent with basic Islamic values, as derived from the Quran and the practice of the Prophet;

- They insist that Islamic law must replace western-inspired legal codes as the basis for regulating political, economic, and social behavior in Muslim societies;

- They are prone to trace most of the problems in the Muslim world to that world’s failure to develop “authentically Islamic” institutions in the political, economic, and social realms; to the fact that Muslims, as Islamists see it, “have turned their back on

Islam;” and to the intrusion into the Islamic world of western-inspired ideas of secularism, nationalism, and materialism.

- They generally consider Islam to be all-inclusive, providing guidelines for all aspects of life. This means, in their eyes, that no area of human activity should be untouched by Islamic values and precepts, and that there can be no separation of religion and politics.

Beyond these shared, core features, however, one cannot speak of a single, coherent “Islamist worldview.” Islamists disagree with each other over what system of government they should adopt, over whether Islam is compatible with democracy, over how the economy should be organized, and over the proper public roles that non-Muslims and women should be expected to play in an Islamic polity.

When discussing “contemporary Islamist thinking,” at least three additional points ought to be kept in mind:

1. So far, most countries in the Muslim world remain governed by secular regimes. Therefore, it remains largely a matter of speculation what Islamist polities might look like. Only in predominantly Shiite Iran did an Islamist revolution succeed (in 1979), and Sudan is the only Arab country where Islamist forces seized power (in 1989, through a military coup). The limited number of avowedly Islamist regimes does not provide broad enough a basis to generalize about existing Islamist polities.

2. When one talks about “Islamist thinking,” one refers to the views that Islamists embrace in public, at a time when they usually are in the opposition or in exile. The views they actually espouse might be different. And their views might change if and when they acquire power. Consequently, while one may give the so-called “moderate,” “pragmatic” Islamists the benefit of the doubt when they profess a commitment to democracy and pluralism, one also should maintain a healthy dose of skepticism about what at least some of those Islamists’ true intentions might be. Consider for instance the one case (Sudan) in the Arab world where a leading Sunni ideologue (Hassan al-Turabi) was given an opportunity to implement the non-threatening, liberal vision of Islam that he often had presented to western audiences. The results of the policies that he played a key role in designing and carrying out were, to say the least, hardly encouraging. The reality of life in the Sudan under the Islamist-military government that took power in 1989 has been in sharp contrast to the “pragmatic” and “moderate” views that Turabi had preached. That has been true in virtually all areas related to democracy and pluralism: freedom of expression and association, tolerance of dissent, women’s rights and the rights of minorities.

3. “Islamist thought” is also thought in progress. Islamist thinking on government, the economy, social issues, and the West is still evolving, largely in response to government policies, diplomatic developments, and changing social and economic conditions in the region. It is important not to “freeze” Islamist thinking in time, and to monitor how Islamists have changed, and continue to alter, their views on critical issues.

Because in a paper of this sort one is inherently limited in the range of authors one can and should draw on, the discussion that follows is based primarily on the thinking of key Sunni Islamist ideologues in the Arab world and in Pakistan. They are those who have had the greatest impact on the Islamist wave of the past thirty years in the Sunni world. They include two particularly influential, prolific writers whose works has had a major impact on the “Islamic revival” from one end of the Muslim world to another: the Pakistani Mawlana Abul-Ala Mawdudi (1903-1979) and the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966).

Mawdudi wrote in Urdu, but his works were translated into Arabic from the 1950s onward, and they have inspired at least two generation of Islamist activists. In 1941, Mawdudi also established in what was then British-controlled India the Jamaat-I-Islami (the Islamic Association), which after the creation of Pakistan in 1947 became the leading Islamist organization in Pakistan and indeed the entire Indian subcontinent. Qutb, who languished in President Gamal Abd al-Nasser’s jail from 1956 to 1966, was eventually executed by Nasser in 1966. He is remembered primarily for his most popular book, *Signposts on the Road (Ma`alim fi-l-Tariq)*, an Islamist manifesto that shaped the thinking and political activism of countless Islamists in the Arab world. Among more recent Islamist ideologues whose views will be used to illustrate key points in this paper, one should mention two key figures: Hassan al-Turabi, the “spiritual leader” of Sudan’s Islamist government (until he clashed with Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir in 1999, which ultimately led to his arrest in March 2001); and Rachid Ghannouchi, the founder and leader of Tunisia’s al-Nahda (Renaissance) Islamist movement. Ghannouchi has lived in exile in London since the late 1980s, and is generally considered to be the most prominent “modernist” Islamist ideologue living in the west.

## **Islamist Views on Government**

This section begins by underscoring that Islamists do not usually advocate a specific model of government, and traces the roots of this phenomenon back to Islamic history and traditions. It then proceeds to highlight the centrality of Islamic Law (the *shari`a*) to Islamist thinking in matters of government, before noting that Islamists usually support the need for a separation of executive, legislative, and judicial powers. Finally, it examines the broad array of views that Islamists display toward the concept of democracy.

### **The Absence of a Specific Model of Islamic Government**

While Islamists do see the Muslim polity as it existed under the leadership of Prophet Muhammad (that is, between 622 A.D. and 632 A.D.) and under his four immediate successors (632 A.D. – 661 A.D.) as having come closest to reflecting Islamic ideals, they also stress that there is no single correct form of Islamic government. Islam, they emphasize, does not provide a specific format or framework for organizing politics; it merely offers general principles and values on which an Islamic order, whatever its specific features, should be based. This perspective largely reflects three key features in Islamic doctrine and history.

1. To begin with, neither the Quran nor the *ahadith* (singular, *hadith* – the recorded collection of the sayings and deeds of Prophet Muhammad) endorse a specific form of government. In fact, they never refer to any particular form of government by name. What they do is merely identify the general goals and principles to which any government must adhere if it is to deserve the name “Islamic.” These values and objectives are kept very vague. For instance, an Islamic government is expected to provide the basis for a society characterized by moderation -- to use Quranic terminology, a “median community,” (*al-ummat al-wasit*), a society between the extremes. It is expected to “establish justice” and to “command the good and proscribe evil.” And an Islamic state, we are told, will constantly consider the public good (*maslaha*) in its decision-making process. But Islamic traditions do not describe the kind of governmental structures and institutions best capable of bringing about these goals.

Islamists draw the consequences of that situation. They note that revelation provides general guidelines for human life, and that it describes in great detail the personal attributes that political leaders are expected to display. But they also acknowledge that revelation leaves the specific means of achieving those eternal goals to Islamic communities themselves, depending on various historical circumstances and the specific conditions under which these communities operate. Consequently, Islamists consider that

it is natural for there to be a broad range of opinions and disagreements among scholars regarding which specific model of Islamic government might be best suited to a given Muslim community.

**2.** In addition, for all the talk about Islam being “an inherently political religion” -- one that does not recognize the legitimacy of a separation between religion and politics -- the Quran in fact has little specific to say about politics and government. That critical characteristic, too, helps explain why Islamists do not advocate a single model of government. Out of the Quran’s 6,236 verses, probably no more than one hundred contain rules directly concerned with what we would call politics. The rest, that is, the overwhelming majority, deal either with issues of ethics, morality, and spirituality, or with matters of everyday life. Moreover, even those verses that have implications for politics are fairly vague. They do not prescribe specific types of political institutions, and make no effort to identify a particular form of government ideally suited to an Islamic society. It is, in fact, the Quran’s lack of direct interest in political and governmental matters that makes it possible for Islamists to take very different attitudes on such basic issues as whether Islam is compatible with democracy (see below).

**3.** Finally, Islamists – like all Muslims – realize that for almost the entirety of Islamic history, the realities of Muslim government have deviated enormously from the ideals set in the Quran. Muslims generally agree that it was only under the leadership of the Prophet himself (622 A.D. to 632 A.D.) and under that of the first four caliphs (the so-called “rightly guided caliphs,” *al-khulafa’ al-rashidun*, from 632 A.D. to 661 A.D.) that the Muslim polity was governed in ways that were consistent with Islamic ideals. But thereafter, a powerful family, that of the Umayyad, took over political leadership, used it to further its own interests, and ushered in the era of dynastic rule in the Middle East.

Under the kind of political structure that emerged, government in Muslim lands was hardly consistent with Quranic norms and injunctions. The authority of Muslim leaders rested primarily on their control of the instruments of political power and coercion, and only secondarily on their religious legitimacy (Bill and Springborg, 2000: 34). Thus, as Islamists (and most other Muslims) see it, a truly Islamic polity existed for only 38 years, over thirteen centuries ago. That is hardly enough to provide specific, historically relevant guidelines on how an Islamic polity ought to be organized and regulated in the modern age. Historical precedents therefore do not constrain Islamists in the forms of government that they advocate.

What may be retained from this discussion is the following:

- Islamic history does not provide Islamists with much guidance – but, by the same token, it gives them with a great deal of flexibility -- on how an Islamic polity should manage its affairs;

- Islamists recognize this situation and accept it;
- There is no monolithic “Islamist worldview” regarding the specific forms that an Islamic state should assume. In fact, many Islamists claim that one of the strengths of Islam lies in the flexibility that Islamic doctrine provides on political matters: Islam does not prescribe a single form of government, but is compatible with a wide variety of constitutional formulas, depending on time and place, as long as these formulas lead to a society regulated by Islamic principles.

- Perhaps the greatest shortcoming of Islamist thinking on government and politics is how little it has to say about the specific institutional arrangements which, in light of what we know about human behavior, will allow Islamist goals to be achieved. Sunni Islamist thought shies away – indeed, it seems to avoid deliberately – any meaningful, substantive reflection on the concrete structures and procedures that are likely to be most effective at translating Islamist intentions into reality (Roy, 1994: 61-62). While Islamist writers pay considerable attention to the general principles and norms that the Islamic state is supposed to embody, and to the personal qualities (piety, outstanding character, a record of good conduct, knowledge of the Quran, etc.) that those holding political offices are expected to display, they display no real interest in institutional design. The following sections will provide numerous illustrations of this phenomenon.

### **The Centrality of Islamic Law**

- While Islamists agree that there is no single correct form of government, they also stress the central role that Islamic Law must play in any Islamic state. Indeed, what defines an “Islamist” is, first and foremost, the belief that a return to the *shari`a* is the primary imperative facing Muslim societies, and that implementation of the *shari`a* will provide solutions to these societies’ current problems. Significantly, when during a police interrogation in the mid-1960s Sayyid Qutb was asked “What are the major divergences between the present regime [that of Gamal Abdel Nasser] and the one you aspire to?” his response was:

“Now the *shari`a* is not the sole source of all legislation; I would like it to be installed as such. This is the major divergence, all others are derivative” (Sivan, 1985: 93).

- To Islamists, it does not matter so much what specific form of government is used, or what it is called, as long as it enforces Islamic law. To them, what makes a Muslim a Muslim is that s/he conducts his/her life in accordance with Islamic Law. Ultimately, therefore, the *raison d’être* of any Islamic state is to create a society ruled by the *shari`a*.

- Islamists view the manner in which, and procedures through which, Islamic law is applied as secondary. Uniformity of religious practice, or of implementation of the *shari`a*, is not the goal. Different communities’ practices can diverge to a certain extent,

as long as sincere effort is made (by properly trained scholars using the revealed sources) to determine how individuals and the community as a whole, in view of their specific circumstances, can best achieve the ideals laid out in the body of Islamic Law.

- The ruler himself – and anyone holding political authority -- is constrained by Islamic Law. Since his basic mandate is to execute God’s Law, he cannot violate its commandments. To Islamists, the supremacy of Islamist law inherently prevents personal, arbitrary rule or the dictatorship of one individual or group. That point was a cornerstone of the thinking of Mawdudi and Qutb. It has been emphasized as well by Hassan al-Turabi, who notes:

“An Islamic state ... is subject to the higher norms of the *shari`a* ... Politically this rules out all forms of absolutism. Legally it paves the way for the development of constitutional law, a set of norms limiting state powers. In fact, the Islamic traditions of rules limiting the power of the sovereign is much older than the concept of constitutional law in the secular West” (al-Turabi, 1983: 242).

- One area in which contemporary Islamists clearly break with classical Islamic thinking is regarding the right of rebellion under a ruler who does not govern by the *shari`a*. In classical times, theologians felt that Muslims should obey even an “unjust” ruler. They believed that this was imperative if societies were to avoid *fitna* (civil strife, chaos), since the latter would foreclose any possibility of devoting oneself to the pursuit of religious knowledge, or of conducting one’s life in accordance with Islamic ideals. As the famous medieval theologian al-Ghazali had put it, “better sixty years of tyranny than one day of anarchy.” For the sake of maintaining peace and order, Muslims were enjoined to put up with arbitrary, oppressive rulers who did not govern by the *shari`a*.

Modern Islamists have strongly rejected this line of thinking. In their view, a ruler or government that disregards or violates the basic precepts of the *shari`a* effectively breaks the contract under which the ruled owe allegiance to the authorities. In such a situation, they claim, the population in fact has a religious duty to rebel in order to re-establish the supremacy of Islamic Law. (However, in the absence of specific institutions in charge of deciding whether or not the ruler is in compliance with the *shari`a*, and when he ceases to be, this position unfortunately raises more questions than it answers.)

### **The Separation of Powers in Islamist Thought**

Islamist thought usually distinguishes, implicitly or explicitly, between executive, legislative, and legal-judicial authority. It circumscribes (though to degrees that vary from one Islamist ideologue to another), the authority and freedom of maneuver of the

political leader / executive authority, and suggests, or explicitly endorses, a separation between executive, legislative, and judicial roles.

### Executive Authority

- In Islamist thought, the political leader (executive authority) may not legislate. The primary reason for this state of affairs lies in the supremacy of the *shari`a*. Islamists believe that, for the most part, the Law already has been given in the form of the *shari`a*, and that the ruler's main duty is merely to make sure that the *shari`a* is enforced.
- As will be discussed further below, however, there are areas in which the *shari`a* needs to be interpreted, or for which the *shari`a* is silent, and where there is accordingly some room for human law-making (as opposed to applying a God-given Law). But most Islamists believe that those areas are largely beyond the head of state (or executive authority)'s sphere of responsibility.
- The head of state's legitimacy rests on his implementation of Islamic law. A leader who disregards the *shari`a* or relies on *non-shari`a* based laws is not considered legitimate. Some Islamists feel that, as long as a leader implements Islamic law, it is relatively unimportant how he is chosen, or how he actually governs. Others, including Mawdudi, disagree. They argue that in an Islamic state the government must be formed in a way that reflects popular will, and that it can remain in office only so long as it continues to enjoy the confidence of the ruled (or at least a majority of them). The head of state, for one, must be chosen through consultation, and must retain the trust and support of those who selected him (Adams, 1983: 117). According to this perspective, the ruler is bound by both the *shari`a* and (at least a degree of) popular will.
- Still, even those Islamists like Mawdudi who stress that the ruler is to be selected through a consultative process have little specific to say about the exact nature of that process. Once again, the trend in Islamist literature is to argue that the procedural details of selection are relatively unimportant, and that they should reflect the particular historical, cultural, and socioeconomic features of the communities involved. But it is relevant to note that the key Islamist ideologues discussed in this paper make no reference to the principle of election as a way through which the ruler should be chosen.

### Legal-Judicial Authority

- In Islamist thought, the judiciary is expected to be controlled by religious scholars (*fuqaha*), and has the critical responsibility of interpreting the *shari`a*. Most Islamists believe that, if and when disputes arise regarding whether or not the ruler is living up to his commitment to implement the *shari`a*, it is the judiciary's responsibility to adjudicate

that dispute (in accordance with the principles set out in the Quran and the Sunna). In that case, the judgment of the *fuqaha* is expected to be binding on both rulers and ruled (Iqbal, 1983: 253).

- In addition, Islamist thinkers usually invest religious scholars with the responsibility of scrutinizing new laws, to make sure that they are consistent with the *shari`a*. A committee of religious scholars also may decide who has the “proper credentials” required to stand for election to public office (if elections are to take place). These principles actually are applied in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where they take the form of a twelve-member Council of Guardians (COG) and an eighty-six member Assembly of Experts (AOE). The COG, which consists largely but not exclusively of clerics, determines whether an individual who wishes to run for parliament or the presidency displays the proper “Islamic” credentials (character, ethics, etc.). The COG also reviews legislation passed by the Iranian parliament (*Majlis*), and is empowered to veto laws if it deems them to be “un-Islamic.” The AOE is made up entirely of clerics, and its main responsibility is to elect and reconfirm periodically the Supreme Leader.

- Traditionally, anyone can enter the ranks of the *fuqaha* provided one is willing and capable of undertaking the required study of religious texts, Islamic jurisprudence, and traditions. Since legal-religious scholars are the cornerstone of any Islamic government, and since theoretically at least anyone can become such a scholar, Islamist government has, according to its advocates, strong meritocratic features.

- Furthermore, there is widespread agreement among Islamists that religious scholars are fallible. This view reflects the classical distinction between *shari`a* and *fiqh*. Islamists regard the *shari`a* as God's eternal will for mankind, and therefore believe that it is infallible. By contrast, *fiqh*, which is usually translated as “Islamic jurisprudence,” consists of efforts by religious scholars to apply the *shari`a* to specific cases. As such, *fiqh* is open to error. And the judgments of previous generations of religious scholars can be subject to amendments or modifications in light of new evidence. Consequently, Islamic legislation must remain flexible. For that reason, all Islamists are opposed to *taqlid* (“imitation”), the indiscriminate following of interpretations by earlier jurists. Instead, they feel that careful and constant re-examination of the cumulative tradition of Islamic law is essential to the life of the Muslim community. The fact that an opinion may have been suitable to a given time and place is no guarantee that it is appropriate to a different environment. When religious scholars believe that the rulings of earlier jurists no longer should apply, or that they do not fit the specific conditions of a given community, they should exercise *ijtihad*, independent legal reasoning. *Ijtihad* should be consistent with the letter and the spirit of the *shari`a*, and guided by the search for justice. Islamists urge each community and generation constantly to refer to the revealed sources to design rules that are both consonant with God's will and appropriate to the specific historical and cultural conditions of the society for which they are elaborated.

### Legislative Authority

As discussed earlier, the primacy of the *shari`a* in an Islamic state leaves very limited room for man-made laws. Still, Islamists recognize certain areas where what we would describe as “legislative activity” can take place. Beginning with those areas in which the margin of maneuver of the “legislators” is most circumscribed, and moving to those where it is greater, the areas in question consist of the following:

- Situations that are similar to those for which the *shari`a* has made explicit provisions, but nevertheless slightly different from them;
- When changing circumstances in society call for a reinterpretation of the *shari`a*, as it relates to specific cases (see previous comment on the Islamists’ opposition to *taqlid*);
- Situations to which the *shari`a* never has been applied in the past;
- Cases for which the *shari`a* does not provide straightforward answers, and where reflection therefore is needed to interpret the intent or spirit of the Law, as they relate to those situations;
- Situations for which the *shari`a* provides no clear guidelines;
- Those areas of human affairs toward which the *shari`a* is indifferent. Mawdudi described this domain as the “province of independence legislation,” noting that where the *shari`a* is silent, God had given men permission and the required latitude to design their own laws (Adams, 1983: 126).

But who is to legislate in those conditions? Some Islamists believe that the head of state (the political leader, or *amir*) should be allowed to do so, even though in order to assist him he may appoint, or have the community select, a Council of Advisers. But most Islamists believe that legislation should be entrusted not to the head of the executive branch, but to a separate legislative or consultative body (some Islamists going so far as to call that body a “Parliament”). Yet they differ once again on who would be eligible to serve in that institution, and how it should be chosen.

- Some believe that only those religious scholars who have been thoroughly trained in Islamic law should qualify.
- Others believe it is possible to rely on a mix of classically trained scholars and individuals with expertise in modern subjects. That, for instance, was the position

embraced by Turabi in the early 1980s, when he suggested that parliament should include not only those well versed in religious knowledge, but all those who, because of their expertise in the sciences, technology, law, and economics, for instance, or because of their recognized thoughtfulness, can “enlighten society” and improve the quality of policy-making” (al-Turabi, 1983: 245).

- Some Islamists prefer relying on individuals grounded in both Islamic Law and modern disciplines. That, for instance, was the position of Muhammad Iqbal (1876-1938), a “modernist Islamist” sometimes referred to as the “Father of Pakistan.” It was also the stance espoused by Mawdudi, for whom the members of the legislative or consultative body that he called for had to be familiar with modern knowledge on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the Quran, the Sunna, the *shari`a*, and the accumulated body of Islamic jurisprudence (Adams, 1983: 124).

- Still, many Islamists recognize that, because of the increasingly complex and technical nature of the challenges facing governments in the modern era, a legislature inevitably will consist primarily of modern-trained individuals with no keen knowledge of the nuances of Islamic jurisprudence. Since the laws passed by the legislature must be consistent with the *shari`a*, institutional devices therefore are needed to ensure that legislation passed by primarily lay individuals will not contradict the *shari`a*. One such device is the establishment, within the legislature, of a committee of trained Islamic jurists to supervise legislative activity. Another is the creation of a separate body to advise the legislature on bills to be considered by it (Iqbal, 1983: 259).

### **Islamist Attitudes Toward Democracy**

There is a great diversity of professed opinions among Islamists as to whether Islam is compatible with democracy, or whether a system of government can be both “authentically Islamic” and “genuinely democratic.” Islamists’ declared attitudes toward democracy ranges from complete acceptance of democratic norms to total rejection and condemnation of them.

**At one pole of the continuum are those Islamists who argue that Islam and democracy are fully compatible**, and who claim to find in concepts rooted in Islamic traditions both precedents and support for democratic principles. Among those concepts are *shura*, *ijma`*, *ijtihad*, and *maslaha*.

#### **Shura**

The Quran enjoins those in positions of authority to consult widely with the community before making important decisions. In addition, the Prophet himself relied

heavily on consultation in his decision-making process. He normally would discuss important matters with his companions, and, as a rule, would follow the consensus of opinion among them before proceeding.

Some modern-day Islamists have seized on the importance of *shura*, or consultation, both in the Quran and in early Islamic history, to suggest that Islam favors broad political participation; that it urges rulers to find ways of maximizing popular input into the decision-making process; and that the executive branch in particular must find ways of consulting widely before making decisions. Some contemporary Islamists even claim that *shura* and similar Islamic concepts, provide Islamic sanctioning for democratic forms of government in general, and for western-type parliamentary systems in particular. In the modern world, they suggest, true *shura* only can be ensured through elections.

What make such interpretations possible is the very lack of specificity of Islamic doctrine on the subject of *shura*. While Islamic theology underscores the importance of *shura*, it makes no effort to prescribe or describe in any detail the institutional mechanisms according to which *shura* is expected to take place. Consequently, *shura* can take the form of an elected parliament (with limited or extensive powers), or of an appointed advisory council (the decisions of which can be binding or not). As long as the ruler is believed to be “consulting,” he can be seen as following the principle of *shura*. Some contemporary Islamists endorse, at least publicly, a “maximalist” interpretation of *shura* – one that, presumably through free and fair elections and an elected legislature with extensive powers, aims to ensure a large degree of popular participation and accountability of the rulers to the ruled.

Building on what they see as the centrality of *shura* to Islamic governance, some contemporary Islamist thinkers even have coined the term “*shurocracy*” to refer to the political system they advocate. Such a concept is very revealing of the general philosophy that inspires the writings of those who often are described as “modernist Islamists.” It suggests both a general acceptance of the “essence,” “substance” or “pillars” of democracy (popular participation, government accountability, rule of law, etc.), and a determination to establish a “culturally authentic” political system, consistent in its spirit and forms with indigenous values, among which Islam is seen as preeminent.

Still, the notion that *shura* somehow is compatible with modern democratic norms is highly problematic. It raises more questions than it answers, and leaves most critical issues unresolved, including:

- Is the ruler / government always required to consult, or merely strongly encouraged to do so? Is he /it expected to consult only about “important matters”? If so, who is to determine which issues are critical enough to necessitate consultation?

- How is consultation to be conducted? Through informal or ad hoc channels, and at the ruler's / government's discretion? Or through formal political processes (such as referenda) and the establishment of permanent institutions (such as a "*shura* council" or a parliament) specifically entrusted with providing the ruler with advice? If such institutions are to be created, should their members be elected or appointed? Can they include women? How much religious knowledge or formal training will their members be required to possess? And what should be the goal of those assemblies and councils: to reflect the views of the population at large on the issues at hand, or to seek to resolve issues according to Islamic standards of right and wrong?

- Who is to be consulted – only members of the elite, those who have expertise relevant to the issues at hand, broader constituencies, or the population at large?

- Is *shura* binding or not? Should it be more binding on some issues than others? Can the ruler/ the executive authority disregard the "advice" that it is given through consultation? And if not, what is the penalty for failing to abide by the results of the consultation process? And who will enforce these penalties?

### *Ijma`*

In Islamic doctrine, *ijma`* refers to "the consensus of the community" -- or, in practice, the consensus of opinion among those who have been consulted and speak on behalf of the community. As with respect to *shura*, both the Quran and early Islamic history (especially the practice of the Prophet) provide support for the principle that decisions only should be made after consultation has taken place, a broad range of opinions on the subject at hand have been aired, and a consensus has emerged. In Islamic doctrine, *shura* and *ijma`* are seen as inextricably related (the former is expected to lead to the latter). Consequently, modernist Islamists usually invoke both concepts in their claim that Islam is compatible with democracy.

Yet, questions similar to those raised above in the case of *shura* would seem to apply to the principle of *ijma`*. For one, what happens if and when no consensus emerges? How are persistent disagreements expected to be overcome? Will a given institution or office be given the power to act as final referee? If so, how is that institution or individual to be chosen?

### *Ijtihad*

*Ijtihad* originally referred to the use of independent reasoning to interpret the meaning of religious law. In Sunni Islam, as the expression goes, "the door of *ijtihad* was closed" in the tenth century, shortly after four distinct schools of law (four different

interpretations of the *shari`a*) were codified. From then on, the faithful were expected to follow one of those four schools. For their part, theologians and jurists no longer were allowed to use independent reasoning to interpret the Quran and the Sunna (the “door of *ijtihad*” was never officially closed in Shiite Islam).

Modern-day Sunni Islamists have argued in favor of “reopening the door of *ijtihad*.” They have demanded the right to re-interpret Islamic doctrine and precepts in light of new circumstances – though, they insist, in a manner that will remain fully consistent with the spirit of, and principles laid out in, the Quran and the Sunna. For “modernist” or “moderate” Islamist thinkers, the “reopening of the door of *ijtihad*” makes it possible to devise a system of government that can be consistent with both modern democratic ideals and Islamic values. Through *ijtihad*, they believe, concepts such as *shura* and *ijma`*, borrowed from Islamic traditions, can be re-interpreted and elaborated to make them consistent with modern democratic norms. According to this line of reasoning, *ijtihad* will provide the philosophical-religious underpinnings of, and legitimation for, a form of Islamic democracy suited to the modern world.

### **Maslaha**

*Maslaha*, which translates as “social well-being” or “the general interest,” is yet another concept sometimes invoked by “modernist” Islamists to support their claim that “the spirit of Islam” is compatible with the logic of democracy. Islamic doctrine urges those in positions of authority to keep in mind *al-maslaha al-`amma* (the common good) before making decisions. Government policy, therefore, is expected to advance the interests of the community – not those of specific constituencies. To modernist Islamists, this amounts to a clear rejection of personal rule, and of any form of government that works to benefit the few at the expense of the population at large. Modernist Islamists thus see *maslaha* as an endorsement of the democratic notion that the government should “rule for the people.”

**It is legitimate – indeed necessary -- to maintain at least a healthy dose of intellectual skepticism toward those islamists who argue, publicly at least, in favor of the compatibility of Islam and democracy.**

- Some of them may well be sincere in their belief that the two systems can be reconciled (which certainly does not mean that they are right). If given a chance, they might strive to make possible that synthesis to which they aspire between Islam and democracy (which does not mean it is possible).
- However, it is also important to remember that those Islamist activists who profess such views are usually in opposition to established, secular regimes. They recognize the

genuine popular appeal of democracy – or, at least, of such notions as political participation, popular sovereignty, accountability, and rule of law -- in the modern Muslim world. It is therefore legitimate to wonder whether their apparent espousal of democracy reflects their true beliefs, or whether it stems from tactical considerations. Does it betray merely an attempt on their part to gain popular support? Once in office, would their behavior be at significant variance with their earlier public embrace of democracy?

The answers to those questions are not only a matter of speculation, but they probably vary significantly from one Islamist ideologue or group to the next. Consequently, they call for differentiated assessments and responses by those who seek to engage these individuals and groups into a dialogue. This being said, one finds it hard to escape the impression that many so-called “modernist” Islamists pay lip service to democracy for political advantage. There often is a discrepancy between the “pragmatic and tolerant” views that “moderate Islamists” present to western audiences, and the far more militant and hard-nosed writings and declarations (usually in Arabic) to their Middle Eastern followings, or when they speak among themselves. Most importantly, their professed commitment to democracy seem incompatible with the stated goal, shared by many of them, to establish an Islamic state governed by the *shari`a* and aimed at the active promotion of an Islamic “moral order.”

**Many Islamists, in any event, openly reject democracy** (and, one suspects, many more reject it in their hearts.) Sayyid Qutb, for one, was unambiguous in his condemnation of the very essence of democracy: sovereignty of the people, which he denounced in the early 1960s as a violation of the sovereignty of God. Since then, a categorical rejection of democratic principles has been central to the ideology of (among others) the “radical wing” of Algeria’s Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and Algeria’s Armed Islamic Group (GIA), as well as Egypt’s Gamaa Islamiyya and its affiliated organizations. The critique of democracy also is a recurrent, central feature of the discourse of many popular preachers (Sivan, 1995).

- To many Islamists, it is imperative that society be governed not by laws which people make for themselves (directly or through their representatives), but by laws derived from the *shari`a*. Democracy cannot be justified, since it may result in legislation that contradicts the will of God. For the same reason, many Islamists reject the principle of majority rule – since the majority might support decisions that fly in the face of what God has commanded. In fact, some of them argue, the search for majority support may create incentives for political leaders eager for votes openly to support “immoral” positions. As Sayyid Qutb put it early on, the legitimacy of any regime or government should not rest on whether that regime or government is based on the consent of the governed, but on whether it implements Islamic Law. What Qutb called

rabbaniyyah, which translates as “divine sovereignty” or “sovereignty of God,” was to be defining characteristic of the Islamic state he wanted to create.

- Guilt by association also explains the open hostility of many Islamists toward the notion of democracy. Democracy’s western origins often gave it a bad name in the Middle East and the Indian sub-continent, in light of the history of western colonialism and imperialism in those regions. This factor, for instance, played a role in the rejection of democracy by the founders of the two earliest and most influential Islamist movements, Hassan al-Banna (who created the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928) and Abul-Ala Mawdudi (who founded the Jamaat-i Islami on the Indian Subcontinent). For similar reasons, the fact that Arab regimes such as Gamal Abd al-Nasser’s or the Baathist leadership in Syria claimed “democratic credentials” for themselves, just as they were engaged in a ferocious repression of Islamists, further tainted the image of democracy in the eyes of numerous Islamist activists and ideologues.

- Also fueling many Islamists’ hostility toward democracy is the perception that, because of democracy’s foreign origins, acceptance of it might amount to a tacit admission that Islamic civilization had to borrow from outside sources in order to compete in the modern world. From this perspective, an embrace of democracy is seen as tantamount to an admission of failure – an indirect acknowledgment of the incapacity of Islamic civilization to meet new challenges by drawing from its own, indigenous repertoire of ideas. Rejection of democracy on such grounds can be exacerbated by the belief that other ideas and “recipes” imported from the West have contributed heavily to the bankruptcy of today’s political, economic and social order in the Arab world. The logic of this argument is reflected for instance in such arguments as those by the Jordanian Islamist popular preacher Yusuf al-`Azm who sees the call for democracy as reflecting nothing but “an inferiority complex of those of us who are infatuated with Western culture. For isn’t democracy one of those ‘imported ideas’ they are so eager to embrace, ideas which also include nationalism, secularism, socialism?” (quoted in Sivan, 1995).

**Between those Islamists who openly condemn democracy, and those who suggest that Islam and democracy are compatible, one can find a broad variety of Islamist views.** In the end, however, those Islamists who do not squarely endorse democracy usually qualify their support for democratic norms in such a way as to render one extremely skeptical about their actual commitment to democratic ideals. Mawdudi, for instance, advocated what he called a “theo-democracy”: a form of government that would aim to represent people’s views, and that would involve constant consultation of the community, but that nevertheless would be constrained by the limits established by revelation. Presumably, such a government would be theocratic in the sense that it would aim to be consistent with God’s will, as reflected in the Quran and the Sunna, and would involve *shari`a*-based legislation on all issues for which religious law provides clear

answers or guidelines. Yet it also would be “democratic,” if one is to follow Mawdudi’s logic, in that it would rest on constant consultation of the community, would involve the people’s right to select their representatives as well as depose the head of government, and would allow all questions for which no explicit injunction can be found in the *shari`a* to be settled through *shura* and *ijma`* (Adams, 1983: 117). The very logic of this argument makes it clear that support for democratic principles is so tightly subordinated to the primacy of Islamic law as to make Mawdudi’s “theo-democracy” inconsistent with even a minimalist definition of democracy.

## **Islamists and the Economy**

### *The Poverty of Islamist Economic Thinking*

Islamist thinkers thus far have failed to develop a coherent, detailed, and distinctive vision of what an “Islamist economy” or an “Islamist economic program” might look like. In that sense, it is misleading to speak of an “Islamist economic theory” or about “Islamist economics.” Looking at Islamist writings on economic matters, one is struck by two features (see Roy, 1994; Richards and Waterbury, 1996).

- First, economics is, at best, of secondary importance to Islamists. It does not feature prominently in their political agenda, or in the books, articles and pamphlets that emanate from Islamist circles. Islamist thinkers, politicians, and activists are clearly far more concerned with matters of morality, ethics, and piety than with economic questions. Some even express contempt for economics. As Ayatollah Khomeini once remarked when pressed to address economic issues, “the revolution is about Islam, not about the price of melons.” Islamism is driven first by culture (the search for a “moral order,” consistent with God’s will for mankind, as revealed in the Quran) and, second, by politics (the quest for controlling the levers of power that will make it possible to establish that moral order). Economic concerns are far less central to Islamist thinking and strategizing; they come well after cultural and political objectives.

- To the extent that Islamists discuss economic matters, one is forced to acknowledge the poverty of their thinking on the subject. For instance, one is hard pressed to find in Islamist writings “hard analyses” of economic phenomena (Richards and Waterbury, 1996). Neither do these writings reflect a sophisticated understanding of how a modern economy operates in the age of globalization. Islamist writers may seek many things, but of a Nobel Prize in Economics is not one of them. It is revealing that, just as the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) seemed poised to come to power in Algeria in 1991, its platform did not include a coherent economic program. Indeed, the FIS had little to say about the economy. Worse, most of its statements in that area were characterized by inconsistencies, contradictions, and a frightening lack of detail. To a large extent, this situation reflected political calculations. Like other Islamist parties with a broad base of political support, the FIS was seeking to appeal to constituencies with very different (often contradictory) economic interests: professionals and well-off, socially influential, and essentially conservative urban merchants on one hand, and the urban poor and unemployed street youth (the so-called *hittistes*, or “those who lean against the wall”) on the other. In the end, as was true of the FIS, the poorly developed and inconsistent nature of the economic platform of many so-called “mainstream” or

“moderate” Islamist groups reflect a more or less conscious decision on their part to subordinate economic rationality to the search for broad political support. What this situation also implies is that, were such parties to come to power, one might well witness the following:

\* Serious disagreements over economic policy within the ruling coalition, potentially splitting that coalition apart;

\*\* Inconsistent and/or incoherent policy-making in the economic area, depending on which faction within the ruling coalition is ascendant at any given moment.

### *A Middle Ground Between Capitalism and Socialism?*

In discussing economics, many Islamists begin with a rejection of all western economic systems, denounced as godless and exploitative. Until the collapse of the Eastern bloc in the late 1980s, Islamists typically would position their economic philosophy as a middle ground between communist and capitalist ideals. Both would be rejected as immoral – communism because of its atheism, and capitalism for failing to provide checks on greed, hedonism, and materialism. Writing in 1964, Sayyid Qutb described the two systems as responsible for having turned the Third World into “millions of emaciated, ignorant, hungry people who toil night and day in search of food” (Haddad, 1983: 73).

In their (largely unsuccessful) effort to outline the characteristics of a specifically Islamic economic system, modern-day Islamist writers base themselves on classical Islamic sources, but rely most heavily on the Quran. As with respect to politics, the Quran does not advocate a particular type of economic system. However, social concerns are a major theme of the book, and it is those concerns that are central to Islamist “economic” writing. Foremost among them are the Quran’s overriding emphasis on the need for social justice; its rejection of severe economic disparities; its condemnation of economic exploitation by means of usury and dishonesty; its call on well-to-do individuals to use part of their wealth to help the poor and support various other charitable endeavors; and its repeated expressions of concern for the marginalized, those least capable of defending themselves against the vicissitudes of poverty.

Some have suggested that the Quran’s call for equity and social justice should be interpreted as support for socialist measures. Indeed, that was how “socialist Arab regimes” during the 1960s attempted to legitimize such policies as land reform, nationalization, and income redistribution. Similarly, some contemporary radical Islamists suggest that the Quran’s call for wealth to be redistributed, in part, to the poor, cannot be left at the discretion of individuals, but should be one of the state’s primary responsibilities. They consequently envision a very activist state, actively striving to eliminate major class inequalities.

Yet, the majority of Islamists have opposed such interpretations, preferring instead to emphasize the Quran's emphasis on the sanctity of private property, as well as its support for fair and free trade practices.

- Many Islamists, for instance, point out that the explicit rules found in the Quran to specify the exact ratios of inheritance for various family members assume private property in the first place.

- Moreover, the Quran recognizes distinctions in levels of wealth among people as perfectly natural: "Do not covet what God has bestowed in bounty upon one more than another." (4:33)

- The Quran also strongly endorses trade, condemning only fraudulent practices, advocating honesty in all commercial transactions, and prohibiting those exchanges that clearly place one party to a transaction at a disadvantage:

"O believers, when you borrow from one another for a fixed period, write it down. And let a writer write in your presence fairly, and no writer should refuse to write as God has taught him, so let him write and let the debtor dictate and let him fear God, his lord, and not take anything away from it. But if the debtor is of low intelligence or weak or unable to dictate himself, then let someone who can watch over his interest dictate fairly. And call in ... witnesses." (2:283)

- Most importantly perhaps, the Qur'an is generally very positive about the acquisition of wealth, and sees economic success as a legitimate objective for individuals to strive for.

However, the accumulation of wealth by individuals must not cross certain red lines:

- It may not be the result of exploitation of the poor, or of dishonest, corrupt practices that run counter to the ethical framework laid out in the Quran.

- It may not degenerate into greed. While Islam respects wealth, it strongly condemns unbridled individualism, materialism, and hedonism. Knowing how to control one's thirst for material possessions is seen as a critical attribute of a good Muslim. The Quran warns:

"Woe to every fault-finder, slanderer, who collects wealth and counts it repeatedly. He thinks his wealth will bring him eternal life. No, he will certainly be thrown into *hutama* and you know what *hutama* is? It is God's fire that he lights and that descends upon the heart." (104:2-6)

- Classical Islamic as well as modern Islamist writings on the subject of wealth also tend to condemn greed not only on moral grounds, but also as a source of scarcity. Unless individuals demonstrate moderation in their acquisition of material goods, scarcity will result that will accentuate the suffering of the poor. The Quran's call for redistribution to the poor assumes the existence of a surplus to redistribute, and greed by the few is seen as a threat to the very existence of that surplus.

- Finally, the Quran teaches that wealth carries with it serious moral responsibilities. Those who have been blessed with riches are expected to use part of their wealth to advance the welfare of the entire community, and, in particular, to relieve misery among the poor and the oppressed.

"Have you seen the one who makes a mockery of the religion? It is the one who mistreats orphans and works little for the feeding of the poor. Woe, then, to those who pray, yet are neglectful of their prayers -- those who pray for show and withhold charity." (107:2-8)

"[The] pious one is one who believes in God and the last day, the angels, the book and the prophets; and gives of her/his wealth for [God's] love, to relatives and orphans, the needy, the wayfarers and beggars, and for captives; and performs the prayer and pays the alms. (2:178)

"Surely, those who believe and do good deeds and pray and pay charity shall have their reward from their Lord, and no fear [will come] to them and they will not sorrow." (2:272-78)

### *Do Islamists Espouse a Neo-Liberal Economic Agenda?*

As discussed above, Islamists typically have sought to balance the Quran's strong endorsement of trade and private property with its call for social justice. At times, this has been a source of tension, both within Islamist movements and among them.

"Mainstream" Islamists are usually very clear in their defense of free enterprise and individual initiative. They tend to support economic liberalization measures, including privatization and deregulation. They advocate an economy founded on private property, free trade, and market forces. They are critical of the stifling effects of the state's excessive intervention in economic activity, which they denounce as an obstacle to the creation of wealth, and, therefore, as harmful to the community's welfare. They routinely publicize the enormous social and economic costs for the community as a whole of official corruption, crony capitalism, and the confusion of public and private interests among the powerful and well-connected.

Such positions regarding the economy are shaped by several mutually-reinforcing factors:

- Well-to-do urban merchants and industrialists, as well as small and middle-sized entrepreneurs, are often well represented in the audience and supporters of “mainstream” Islamists parties and movements. The economic interests of such constituencies are consistent with a neo-liberal economic agenda based on protection for private property, the disengagement of the state from large sectors of economic activity, the lifting of state-imposed barriers on trade and profit, and the dismantling (or at least curbing) of crony capitalist practices.

- Like virtually every one else, moderate Islamists recognize the failure of state-led attempts at economic development, the detrimental effects of government monopolies and restrictions, as well as the need for the region to rely on market forces to create the jobs and increased standards of living that its people need. As the leader of Algeria’s FIS put it in the early 1990s, “While the liberal motto of ‘laissez faire’ has moved the liberal economy, in socialist Algeria we find that the motto ‘don’t do’ has hindered the economy” (quoted in Esposito and Voll, 1996: 160).

- Minimal government intervention and an economy built around private property and fair trade is consistent with classical Islamic traditions and writings regarding how an economy should operate.

Yet, “mainstream” Islamists certainly do not advocate an economic “free-for-all.” They qualify their support for free enterprise by insisting that the search for profit should not take precedence over the need for society to meet clear moral and ethical, Islamically-defined standards regarding how it organizes its economic activities. In general, they tend to assume that “good,” altruistic Muslims naturally will find a proper balance between, on the one hand, their personal quest for economic success, and, on the other hand, their duty to discharge their obligations toward the entire community. Precisely because they are virtuous, they will not let their legitimate desire for well-being degenerate into avarice and materialism.

Still, it would be a mistake to assume that Islamists cannot push forward a far more state-reliant economic agenda that strictly subordinates the defense of private property and free enterprise to the call for redistributing wealth, fighting exploitative economic practices, and making sure that the well-being of the most vulnerable segments of society is not ignored. That, in fact, is usually the case of “radical” Islamist movements and ideologues; of the “radical wings” of broadly-based Islamist parties; and, more generally, of those Islamists who seek to appeal to the urban poor and/or the disenfranchised youth. Since the Quran does not provide a detailed economic blueprint, and since one of the ideals it seeks to promote is that of social justice, it is possible to find in it enough verses

to justify a “socialist” reading of its “intent.” Such interpretations usually assume that the need for social justice cannot be left dependent on individual, voluntarily-given charity. They emphasize instead that the state must play a leading role in mitigating against economic disparities, and they can go so far as to justify significant encroachments on the right to private property. Thus, while the general philosophy of most broadly-based Islamist movements is consistent with economies organized along liberal lines, it would be a mistake to assume that an Islamist regime will necessarily engage in neoliberal economic policies (Richards and Waterbury, 1996: 362).

### Islamist Economic Prohibitions

Because of specific injunctions found in the Quran and further elaborated by classical Islamic writings, Islamists agree that certain types of economic activity should not be allowed. Particularly important is the prohibition against any form of unearned income (by contrast, for instance, to income derived from fair and honest trade, or from manual labor). Consequently, revenues generated by games of chance (such as gambling) or through speculation are not permitted. As is well known, the Quran also rejects the payment of interest (*riba*), on the ground that it provides one with a source of income that is not based on actual work. Indeed, according to the Quran, those who charge interest will not rise again. But Islamists believe that the Quran permits loans that result not in the payment of interest, but in the lender receiving a share of the profits.

Islamists usually extend the prohibition against income generated through chance to include trading known quantities for unknown quantities. The Quranic principle supporting this position is that both sides of a contract must be known or determined. So, for example, it is permissible to sell a fixed amount of land for a fixed sum of money, but it is not permitted to sell a fixed amount of land and an as yet un-harvested crop for a fixed sum, since the size of the crop is open to question.

## **Islamists and Pluralism**

As was shown to be the case in matters of government and with respect to the economy, there is a wide range of Islamist viewpoints regarding what the rights of women and minorities should be in an Islamic state, as well as on broader issues of intellectual pluralism. The intolerance of broad segments of the Islamist tendency on all those issues is not in question. What is debated among scholars of political Islam is the extent to which “mainstream,” “moderate” Islamist movements and thinkers display in those areas positions that are flexible enough to meet even minimal standards of democracy. The key questions here are as follows:

- When “mainstream Islamists” advocate “a greater role” for Islam in “shaping social and political life,” or when they emphasize the need to show “greater respect” for “Islamic values and ways of life,” what exactly do they have in mind? Do they mean, for instance, that the *sharia* should be enforced? If so, how strictly? Will certain restrictions to *sharia* law apply, and, if so, which ones? And who will make those decisions in the first place?

- How strongly do Islamists believe in the need to enforce a (more or less extensive) moral code of behavior, or in making sure that some basic principles of an Islamic state will not be questioned in public? And how heavy-handed do they believe the state should be in enforcing that order?

- What should be the proper place of women and religious minorities in an Islamic state? Will they enjoy the same legal and political right as Muslim men, or will they operate under restrictions that will relegate them to second-class citizen status? And how tolerant should an Islamic regime be toward secular-oriented individuals who openly oppose the mixing of religion and politics?

“Mainstream Islamists” often disagree on the proper answers to these questions. That is, to a large extent, because those questions stem from the fundamental ambiguity that lies at the core of the “mainstream Islamist agenda”: the claim that an Islamist regime could be both authentically “Islamic” while allowing a large degree of political and intellectual pluralism. In practice, it is clear that trade-offs will have to take place between the desire to promote Islamic values and the commitment to advance pluralism. And the questions that then emerge are essentially the following: how much are “moderate, mainstream Islamists” willing to limit individual freedoms, civil and political rights, and intellectual diversity in order to ensure conformity with basic Islamic principles? And, conversely, how far are they willing to compromise on religious principles to permit a significant measure of intellectual, social, and political liberty?

While the answers to those questions vary from one Islamist movement or group to another, one can risk the following generalizations:

- Issues of morality and culture are the most basic common denominator of Islamists. They lie at the core of the Islamist agenda, and they are those issues about which Islamists typically feel most strongly. Consequently, they are also those on which Islamists are likely to show the least flexibility.

- It is in the areas of the status of women and the rights of religious minorities that one is likely to observe the most visible limits of an “Islamic democracy.”

Many Islamists’ determination to make the individual and society more “virtuous” -- i.e., more prone to think and behave according to “Islamic principles” -- likely would result in the power of the state being used to curb intellectual currents and patterns of behavior seen as inimical to Islamic standards. Thus, it is legitimate to fear that even an Islamic regime dominated by “mainstream Islamists” would use public education, the government’s influence over the media and information, and its control of the judiciary and the instruments of coercion in order to promote certain values and ideas and discourage others. The record of self-styled “Islamic regimes” thus far is clearly not encouraging in that regard.

### *Gender Rights*

Many Islamists have expressed support for the idea that women should be allowed -- indeed encouraged -- to play an active role in public affairs. Islamist organizations often include women’s sections, and modern-educated women have been an important constituency for some of them. Many Islamist groups and ideologues support social and educational measures to advance women’s standing in society. They publicly embrace the idea that women not only should be allowed to vote, but should be permitted to hold any political office.

Still, even Islamists who are better disposed toward women’s rights than their neo-fundamentalist colleagues likely would impose restrictions on women in the public sphere (for instance, in the area of dress codes, or, more generally, to prevent behavior contrary to “Islamic modesty” ). Their relative openness when it comes to women’s voting rights and participation in both political affairs and the working place does not always extend to matters of personal status (such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance rights). Finally, the distinction that is sometimes made between Islamists (who can be relatively open toward women’s rights) and neo-fundamentalists (whose positions on this issue are far more rigid) often breaks down in practice, as one examines concrete Islamist movements or parties. The latter typically include both “modernist Islamists” and individuals with a far more conservative bent on social issues, particularly on those questions related to the status of women.

Morocco's experience is revealing in that regard. When the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) -- the legal, official Islamist party that sits in Morocco's parliament - - decided to assert itself in 2000, it did so on the issue of the status of women in Moroccan society, and by taking a strong stand to oppose the Yousoufi government's National Action Plan for the Integration of Women in Development (*Plan d'Intégration de la Femme au Développement*). This "plan" actually consisted of little more than a catalogue of 215 measures that were supposed to guide the government's stated objective of improving women's socioeconomic conditions and grant them greater legal rights. When (largely for reasons of political strategy and positioning on the fragmented Moroccan political scene) the PJD decided to sharpen its differences with Yousoufi's government and assert its distinct identity, it could have taken any of the many prominent issues dominating the public debate in Morocco at that point. Significantly, however, it seized on the National Action Plan for the Integration of Women in Development (NAPIWD).

The PJD's full-fledged assault on the plan also revealingly focused on merely a handful of proposals in it, those fourteen (out of 215) that directly related to the legal status of women. One such measure had called for rescinding a husband's right to repudiate his wife (which automatically, and without any further proceedings, leads to the annulment of marriage and to the wife being forced out of the conjugal home). The plan had advocated replacing this archaic and cruel tradition by a court divorce. In addition, the NAPIWD had endorsed the legal abolition of polygamy; giving women equal inheritance rights; raising the legal age for marriage from fifteen to eighteen; eliminating the requirement for women over eighteen to secure the permission of a male "tutor" or "guardian" before entering a marriage contract; and rescinding the legal provision that takes away from divorced women the right to keep custody of their children if they remarry. In short, the PJD's devastating critique of the plan focused on those issues related to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other legal rights.

To protest the NAPIWD, the PJD organized on March 12, 2000 one of the largest demonstrations in recent Moroccan history. Held in Casablanca, the event brought together men and women mobilized by the PJD from all of Morocco's regions. They marched "against westernized elites" (those large segments of Moroccan society that had mobilized to support the plan) and "for the respect of Muslim values." Meanwhile, PJD's spokesperson denounced the plan as "inciting Moroccan women to illicit behavior" (prostitution, adultery, having sexual relations outside marriage, etc.). It described the NAPIWD alternately as "financed by the West and Zionism" and as a step toward "the Christianization of Morocco." The Islamist press denounced the minister who had overseen the elaboration of the plan as "an agent of international Zionism" and an "enemy of God." In short, this entire episode in recent Moroccan history illustrates very clearly that those Islamist parties that often are described as "legalist" and "mainstream"

can espouse on issues related to the legal and social status of women positions that cannot possibly be reconciled with Western notions of democracy and human rights.

### *The Rights of Religious Minorities*

Radical Islamists are openly hostile to religious minorities. Israel's policies toward the Palestinians -- and more generally the century-old conflict between Zionism and the Arab world -- shape their views toward Jews. Radical Islamists also openly blame Christians for their role in introducing and promoting secular ideologies (from Arab nationalism to communism) into the Arab world.

For their part, conservative-minded Islamists likely would impose strict restrictions on the rights of religious minorities, relegating them to second-class citizens. In effect, they would go back to the *dhimmi* (protected) status enjoyed by Christians and Jews in the former Islamic empire. Members of the religious minorities would be allowed to practice their own religion. They would be permitted to apply their own religious laws in matters of personal status (marriage, divorce, inheritance and the like), and they would be officially protected by the authorities (that is, the state would be committed to ensuring their physical security, their freedom of religion, their right to own property, and their relative autonomy in managing community affairs). However, religious minorities would operate under significant restrictions of their political rights and civil liberties. For one, they would not be allowed to run for public office (or, at least, for important political positions). Some of them might hold high-ranking offices -- as advisors, technocrats, and senior civil servants -- but they would not be permitted to make critical decisions.

Even the so-called "moderate," "mainstream" Islamists appear to have reservations about non-Muslims being able to make vital policy decisions. They believe that setting the general tone and philosophy of governmental action should be left to Muslims. Probably none of them truly envisions that a non-Muslim could serve as head of state and/or government, or even hold one of the most sensitive decision-making positions in the government. However, they are generally supportive of non-Muslims being able to run for office, or of quotas for non-Muslim minorities in parliament. Mainstream Islamists often appear supportive of non-Muslims enjoying full voting rights and access to parliament, or holding leadership positions in institutions of civil society (such as professional syndicates).

For their part, "modernist Islamists" insist that they are committed to full equal rights for non-Muslims -- some of them, including Iran's philosopher Abdul Karim Soroush quoting the Arabic saying: "There are as many paths toward God as there are people," or drawing on Quranic verses suggesting that pluralism is part of the divine plan:

"If your Lord had so willed, He would have made mankind one community, but they continue to remain divided." (11:118)

"For each of you [religious communities: Jews, Christians, Muslims] we have appointed a law and a ritual. If God had willed it, he could have made you all one religious community. But [he had not] so that he may test you in what he has given you. So compete with one another in good works." (5:48)

### *Intellectual and Social Freedoms*

Islamists' concern with stemming "moral decline" likely would prompt them, once in power, to enact policies that would sharply restrict social freedoms, and the distribution of cultural products (from films to publications) they might see as "encouraging depravity." In several countries where Islamists were given the reins of power (Sudan, Iran), or were provided with an opportunity to implement their agenda at the municipal level (Algeria from June 1990 until January 1992), measures were adopted to forbid public dancing, modern music, the serving of alcohol in public, and forms of entertainment deemed "un-Islamic." Night clubs and gambling places were shut down. A clear majority of Islamists – even "modernist" and "mainstream" ones – display clear hostility toward lifestyle that they believe run counter to God's will. If given a chance, they likely would adopt measures targeting such constituencies as homosexuals.

It is also legitimate to fear that even "mainstream," "moderate" Islamists might support policies that undermine intellectual pluralism and the free flow and exchange of ideas. While "mainstream" or "modernist" Islamists might not promote a forced Islamization of society, it is not clear how tolerant they would be toward secularist thought, or toward voices calling for a strict separation of religion and politics. Some, like Iranian philosopher Abdul Karim Soroush, might welcome such ideas, but others clearly would have misgivings (at best) about them. It is hard to envision Islamists allowing the dissemination of thinking that is explicitly hostile to Islam as a religion.

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